

Community resources

[Follow us on Twitter](#) [Check our Reddit](#) [Twitter this](#) [Digg this page](#) [Contact us on IRC](#)

courage is contagious

Viewing cable 06DAMASCUS531, THE MUSLIM BROTHERS IN SYRIA, PART II: COULD THEY

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cable's unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#06DAMASCUS531**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06DAMASCUS531	2006-02-09 16:06	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10402>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10403>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10404>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10405>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10406>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11322>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11323>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11324>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11325>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11326>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11327>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11328>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11329>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11330>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11331>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11332>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11333>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11336>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11337>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11338>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11339>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11340>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11341>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11342>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11343>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11344>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11345>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11346>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11348>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11349>

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0531/01 0401606
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 091606Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7022
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000531

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: THE MUSLIM BROTHERS IN SYRIA, PART II: COULD THEY WIN AN ELECTION HERE?

REF: A) DAMASCUS 0517 B) 05 DAMASCUS 1231 C) 05 DAMASCUS 1286 D) 05 DAMASCUS 1377

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (U) This is the second of two cables that assess the potential power of the Muslim Brothers in Syria.

¶2. (U) PART II. REASONS FOR THE EXAGGERATED ESTIMATES OF MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD INFLUENCE

¶3. (C) Summary: Most estimates of potential Muslim Brother support range between ten and thirty percent of the Syrian population, with many contacts insisting that even these estimates are inflated. Nonetheless, a non-MB, moderate Islamist political bloc, possibly allied with Syrian businessmen, which combines "the power of money" and "the Islamic street," could do very well in any free elections in Syria (although current conditions indicate that the likelihood of such a scenario is fairly remote). Contacts insist that the Asad regime -- highly unlikely to allow such elections -- has contributed in a variety of ways to the perception of exaggerated potential influence of the Muslim Brothers in Syria. End Summary.

¶4. (C) MB/SIMILAR-GROUPING SEEN TAKING 10-30 PERCENT: Taking into account minority demographics (35 percent of the Syrian population), Islamist cleavages, and other details (see Ref A), most observers here assess that the Muslim Brothers, or another Islamist group representing them, could attract a maximum of 30 percent support in Syria. Many, like recently released Damascus Spring detainee XXXXXXXXXXXX (who had a dalliance with the MB for a year in the mid 1960's and knows them well) argue that an MB-oriented political grouping in Syria would get no more than ten percent.

¶5. (C) MINORITY VOTE COULD BLOCK EXTREMISTS: While most agree that Syria's compact minorities could and would prevent any MB or other radical Islamist electoral takeover (assuming free elections), there is less consensus about the impact of this minority vote if a more moderate Islamic bloc, led by the current Islamic establishment, allied itself politically with merchant/business elites in the major cities. Political observers as diverse as XXXXXXXXXXXX, a influential Sunni sheikh at the XXXXXXXXXXXX institute, and XXXXXXXXXXXX, a Christian Ba'athist reformer, insist that a moderate Islamist-businessmen bloc (not including the MB or other radicals) would be unbeatable in any free elections because of the combination of money and "the Islamic street." That Islamic street would be controlled by the Islamic network of mosques and institutes run by people like XXXXXXXXXXXX and establishment Sunni sheikhs. XXXXXXXXXXXX insists that while that the Christians, for example, would not vote for "the Islamists," they would, under the influence of money and advertising, vote for "the merchants." (Comment: We have received no indication from our business contacts that such a political coalition is viewed as viable at the present time.)

¶6. (C) EXAGGERATION OF MB POWER CONTINUES: Despite the constraining factors, the potential electoral appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood (or some repackaged party resembling it) continues to elicit fear and exaggerated assessments of what would happen in any democratic scenario in Syria. One generally well-informed contact insisted that MB support in any free elections "would be massive." These assessments have been buttressed by alarmist scenarios that fundamentalism is somehow "taking over" in Syria. Much of the exaggeration has been unintentional, while some of it (from quarters sympathetic to the SARG) has been deliberate.

¶7. (C) EXAGGERATION FED BY RISE OF ISLAMISM: A critical element leading to this exaggeration has been the Islamist revival that has occurred in Syria, as it has throughout much of the Arab world over the past few decades. A small part of that growth in religious feeling, as reflected in Syria, has been fundamentalist in nature, fed by SARG despotism, economic despair, the conflict in Palestine, revulsion at regime cronyism and corruption, and other factors including, more recently, the war in Iraq and the sense among some in

the Muslim community that the U.S.-led war against terror represents part of a "crusade against Islam." Some fundamentalist groups have taken up arms in Syria (usually as a part of efforts to join the insurgency in Iraq) and in the past year, have been exposed to episodic, violent SARG crackdowns. (Note: The most recent incident occurred in early February, on the outskirts of Damascus, with SARG

security forces reportedly killing one armed fundamentalist and confiscating weapons and explosives.)

18. (C) However, most of that Islamist wave in Syria has not been violent or even fundamentalist. It is true that the number of people attending Friday prayers seems to have risen substantially, that the number of young women wearing the Islamic scarf (hijab) continues to increase at a similar rate, and that Islam in general is a more powerful force in public life in Syria than it was 40 years ago (for a review of this rise in Islamist sentiment in Syria, see refs A, B, and C.)

19. (C) MB POWER EXAGGERATED BY LACK OF FREEDOM: There are other factors that have also contributed to the exaggerated sense of potential political power of the Muslim Brothers. Many argue that over forty years of authoritarian Ba'athist rule have contributed to this exaggerated sense of how powerful the Muslim Brothers must be. According to Christian MP XXXXXXXXXXXX, Syrian political players do not fear the Islamists. If there were freedom and elections, their real weaknesses would show. In XXXXXXXXXXXX's view, academics and journalists, among others, have misread the Syrian political scene in making their assessments of the MB's power. Dissident XXXXXXXXXXXX concurs, noting that "in the shadow of freedom, they are weak. They can't really do politics. They have no political program," as opposed to a religious agenda, he insisted. According to human rights activist XXXXXXXXXXXX, if the MB were as powerful as many think, they would not have repeatedly altered their political program towards less extreme positions to try to make themselves more palatable to Syrians.

110. (C) Contacts assert that the maximalist projections of MB potential power are based on current assessments of the appeal of Islam in Syrian society today and are inevitably inflated because the SARG has systematically suppressed any secular political or cultural organizing. As XXXXXXXXXXXX notes, "there are 10,000 mosques in Syria where Muslims can gather at will to discuss issues. If I get together with five secular people in my home, the government breaks it up and threatens to arrest people." According to this view, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic trends in Syria have profited from a situation of tolerance for "anything Islamic" in society (except overt political organizing) and intolerance for anything secular. Even the assessment that the Muslim Brotherhood -- or some repackaged grouping that would include them -- could get as much as 30 percent of the vote in any free election held is false, argue many, caused by the media, by the government, and by the "forced absence" of secular forces. Recently released Damascus Spring detainee XXXXXXXXXXXX, with a background in pan-Arabist politics, assessed that whatever vote total the Muslim Brotherhood received in any initial free elections (he posited 20-25 percent), that support would drop by 50 percent in subsequent elections, in the face of democratization and political competition from secular groups once again able to organize on a level playing field.

111. (C) REGIME ALSO CONTRIBUTING: While most observers would agree that political despotism has quietly nourished conservative Islamist political tendencies, others see a more active SARG hand, led by the security services, manipulating the internal scene to encourage the perception that only the secular Asad regime stands between a takeover by the Islamist hordes. Most observers point out that the rise in Islamism in Syria has occurred under a secular government that is carefully manipulating Islamist tendencies -- as it did in the run-up to the February 4 riots in Damascus -- to send the message to the West that the Asad regime is a bulwark against a fundamentalist takeover. While the SARG is focused and relatively aggressive in its efforts to suppress armed fundamentalists in Syria, some contacts insist that the security services regularly meet separately with different groups, encouraging fundamentalist tendencies on the one hand, for example (while suppressing them -- even violently -- on the other), or pressing religious leaders to push a certain message in the mosques (while SARG officials position themselves to appear as secularists struggling to counter a surge of religious conservatism).